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Ageing-in-Place:
Home Enhancement to Give Elderly a “Dream Home”

Emily Chan | Translation: Angel Gao & Tony Lai

Everyone has their own definition of “dream home”, but there is always something in common – comfort and safety. Seniors prefer to stay in their own house for as long as possible, yet the inevitable decline of their physical functionality in the process of ageing has rendered some to rely on wheelchairs, canes and other aids. The original interior design might pose threats to them, making the house unsuitable for them.

In view of this service gap, collaborated with the Institute of Surveyors Building Surveying Cooperation, the Hong Kong Housing Society launched the “Elderly Safe Living Scheme” to enhance public awareness of barrier-free domestic design through public education in the forms of road shows, seminars, consultation, and home assessment.

The Elderly Safe Living Scheme

Launched in 2013, the Elderly Safe Living Scheme targets elderly aged 65 or over who are currently residing in their self-owned private housing estates, as well as their caregivers, and provides them with professional home safety assessment and consultation service. Service users can then arrange for home enhancement work according to the assessment results, so that elderly’s chances of injury can thus be reduced. The pilot project was set initially in areas with high proportion of elderly population, high density of private buildings, and significant urban decay, such as Island East and Sham Shui Po. For years, the programme was welcomed by many carers and recently extended to Wan Chai, Yau Tsim Mong, and Tsuen Wan since April, 2014. In order to continuously improve service quality, the Asia Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies of Lingnan University (APIAS), was commissioned by HKHS to conduct an evaluation study on their Elderly Safe Living Scheme for Elderly Home Owners, so as to grasp a better understanding of users’ satisfaction, and suggest ways to improve the service.

Deteriorating Elderly Health Condition Leads to Declining Independent Living Capacity

From December 2013 to December 2014, survey and in-depth interviews were employed by APIAS to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of customers’ feedbacks towards the service. The survey comprised of two stages, the pre-test and post-test: The former showed that there existed a varied degree of health problems among senior participants, for example, high blood pressure, eye disease, etc. Nearly 90 percent of them had regularly receive follow-up physical checkups, while more than 60 percent of the elderly could not maneuver within the home environment without walking aids or support from others. The majority of service users participated in this programme aimed to improve their current domestic environment, especially high risk areas such as toilets and kitchens, and to facilitate the elderly to live a convenient daily life. The scheme has also drawn attention of some young-olds to have earlier preparation for their retirement needs.

Improve Interior Design to Avoid Risks

Those service recipients who had performed home enhancement were invited to participate in a post-test survey and an in-depth interview. The survey reported improvement of satisfaction of elderly towards their home as well as their convenience to maneuver within it. Interviewees spoke highly of the scheme, especially regarding the profession and attentiveness of the building surveyors and occupational therapists. After assessing a senior’s physical functionality and safety of his house, suggestions for home modification were formulated to tailor for the elderly’s specific requirements, which help them recognise and take actions to reduce domestic risk factors, and enhance their capacity to live independently as well as the possibility to continue ageing-in-place.

Ms. Sabrina Li, Occupational Therapist of the Elderly Resources Centre of the Hong Kong Housing Society (Elderly Service), believes that the scheme is suitable for seniors with different health conditions. It plays a preventive role for the able-bodied elderly and an interventional role for elder persons with weak physique. She said: “The objective of this scheme is to empower senior participants to live independently within a safe domestic environment, so that they do not need to depend on their carers. For example, many elders do not like being helped by their carers to take a bath because of privacy. Yet installing handrails at a moderate height and placing bathing chairs can indeed enable the elderly to use the bathroom safely without assistance.”

Taking Actions to Build a “Dream Home” for the Elderly

Having been worked for their whole life, our seniors have pursued nothing but a safe and comfortable home. If you do wish the elders to live a care-free life, please consider contacting the Elderly Resources Centre of the Hong Kong Housing Society for a visit to learn more about the Elderly Safe Living Scheme.